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HISTORY

side of English history, and provided evidence which was not accessible in Macaulay's day for rightly estimating the share of the country gentry in the development of the state.

The great defect of the gentry was their indifferent education. Burnet severely described them as ' for the most part the worst instructed, and the least knowing of any of their rank I ever went amongst ', and compared them unfavourably with the Scots of the same class.¹ The schools of the time were bad, and sport was more attractive to young men brought up in the country. But Macaulay exaggerates when he says :

Few knights of the shire had libraries so good as may now perpetually be found in a servants' hall, or in the back parlour of a small shopkeeper. An esquire passed among his neighbours for a great scholar, if Hudibras and Baker's Chronicle, Tarlton's Jests and the Seven Champions of Christendom, lay in his hall window among the fishing rods and fowling pieces.²

The seventeenth-century libraries which occasionally come into the market, bills for books, references in letters, and other indications show that there was more reading done in the country houses than Macaulay admitted, and the state of the English book trade refutes the view that neither the country gentry nor the country clergy bought

books.

Macaulay says that the power of the country gentlemen and the clergy in the rural districts was in some measure counterbalanced by the power of the yeomanry. They were not less than 160,000 in number, but the class of small landowners was already beginning to diminish, and

¹ Own Time, ii. 64.

² 1,384.